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Possums and Politics: A North Carolina Tradition Ends

By Colin Campbell, Monday, January 8, 2018

RALEIGH -- "Possum out: Famous New Year's event in Brasstown shockingly ends after one final descent" was the lead headline in last week's Cherokee Scout, North Carolina's westernmost newspaper.

After surviving years of animal rights lawsuits from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Clay County's New Year's Eve Possum Drop is calling it quits. "It's a hard job to do, and it's time to move on," founder and organizer Clay Logan told the Scout. From now on, North Carolinians looking to watch something weird get lowered from the sky will only have two options: Eastover's Flea Drop and Mount Olive's Pickle Drop.

But thanks to legislators, the Possum Drop will live on in state law -- opening the door to someone resurrecting the tradition. A 2015 law to keep the event street legal in the face of lawsuits offers a five-day exemption every year in which "no state or local statutes, rules, regulations or ordinances related to the capture, captivity, treatment or release of wildlife shall apply to the Virginia opossum."

The legislation passed despite worries from one Democrat that it could allow possums to be "tortured, burned or skinned alive by anyone in this state" during the five-day period. It was the latest in a series of bills to keep the Possum Drop going, one of which was hilariously titled "The Opossum Right-to-Work Act."

Brasstown always disputed PETA's claim that the event constituted animal cruelty, and the vast majority of lawmakers agreed. "The opossum is not actually 'dropped,' it is lowered with great care," says the disclaimer on the event's website. "We treat our little friend with respect, hold him in awe, and do not inflict any injury or traumatize God's creature of the night."

The Possum Drop legislation wasn't the first time the humble marsupial got its strange tail tied up in state politics. The Brasstown event came in the wake of a tongue-in-cheek presidential campaign by the community's "honorary mayor," Mercer Scroggs, who said he was running on the "Possum Party" ticket and promised voters he'd provide "a possum in every pot," according to a 1992 (Raleigh) News & Observer article.

And back in 1970, Gov. Bob Scott found himself under fire from possum enthusiasts. According to the N.C. Government & Heritage Library, Scott was given Slow Poke the possum after he won a "prettiest possum" competition during the annual Spivey's Corner Hollerin' Contest.

The state's newly crowned "Miss Possum" -- apparently that was a real beauty pageant -- was on hand for the ceremony. When she told the governor she'd never eaten possum meat, Scott offered to host a possum banquet and put Slow Poke on the menu.

Slow Poke took up residence in the basement of the governor's mansion ahead of the proposed feast, but Scott's office was deluged by angry calls and letters urging him to cancel the dinner. The governor relented, holding a

ceremony at the state Capitol to pardon Slow Poke and set him free in Harnett County's Raven Rock State Park, which put up a "Home of Slow Poke the possum" sign.

But much like the organizers of the Possum Drop, Scott wouldn't let animal rights activists change his ways, and he served a barbecue-sauced possum during a black tie gala later in his term. "I shall not be thwarted in my appetite for possum," he said at the time.

The possum's starring role in state politics decades later is a testament to the enduring value of folksy, quirky rural traditions in North Carolina -- even as the state's growth turns increasingly to urban areas where city slickers like me have never tasted possum stew (do something about that, fancy "southern" restaurants!).

I'm hopeful Brasstown leaders can find a way to bring back the Possum Drop. If they don't, I'm making a New Year's resolution to ring in 2019 at the Flea Drop in Eastover (formerly known as Flea Hill).

What could be more festive than watching a 30-pound ceramic flea descend a pole as a small-town crowd wearing flea hats cheers the dawn of a new year?

Colin Campbell is editor of the Insider State Government News Service. Follow him at NCInsider.com or @RaleighReporter. Write to him at ccampbell@ncinsider.com.

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Governor Should Lead on Pipeline

By John Hood
January 8, 2018

RALEIGH -- I think the administration of Gov. Roy Cooper favors the construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, a 600-mile project connecting natural-gas generation in West Virginia to natural-gas consumers in Virginia and North Carolina. But I'm not entirely sure.

Two of Cooper's cabinet secretaries have sent conflicting signals, and the governor himself hasn't weighed in personally on the pipeline, which will traverse eight North Carolina counties. Both friends and foes of the project have asked Cooper to clarify his position, reports Carolina Journal's Don Carrington, but as yet to no avail.

I wish he would. For Eastern North Carolina, the Atlantic Coast Pipeline has major economic and environmental implications.

Green-energy advocates and left-wing activists argue that the pipeline will only enable the continued reliance on fossil fuels. While burning natural gas to generate electricity may emit far less carbon than coal does, it still emits some -- and environmentalists argue that methane escaping from pipelines is itself a potent driver of climate change. The NAACP further argues that the placement of the project will disproportionately burden minorities and the poor.

Michael Regan, Cooper's secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality, seems at least somewhat sympathetic to these concerns. Unlike the other two affected states, North Carolina has yet to approve the necessary water-quality permits. "The state has reserved the right to do what North Carolina has to do to best protect its citizens and the environment," Regan told the Triangle Business Journal.

On the other hand, North Carolina Commerce Secretary Tony Copeland appears to be a strong advocate. He points out something that people often forget about natural gas: it isn't just a fuel for power plants. It is also used directly in the production of manufactured goods such as plastic, cement, and paper. Natural gas makes up about 14 percent of the inputs used for fertilizer production, for example. While laying the pipeline will employ thousands of construction workers for a time, the real economic payoff will come from permanent jobs and income gains derived from gas access and lower-cost electricity. "We have counties that are 40 miles from a natural-gas line," Copeland said. "They will never get manufacturing in without access to natural gas."

Several of Cooper's predecessors have faced similar issues with high stakes and political complexities. Former governors Jim Hunt and Jim Martin, for example, were both challenged by long-running disputes about how to dispose of hazardous and low-level radioactive wastes. They felt compelled to exercise leadership on the issue even though they knew critics might be vicious. Martin was actually burned in effigy. For her part, former Gov. Beverly Perdue vetoed a 2012 bill to allow fracking as part of oil and gas exploration in the state. The Republican-majority General Assembly overturned her veto, which gained her little political benefit and, shocking as it may seem, may simply have reflected her heartfelt opinion on the issue.

As you can tell, I'd prefer that Gov. Cooper come out in favor of the pipeline and ensure that the permitting process is completed in an expeditious manner so the project can proceed. Despite environmentalist claims to the contrary, North Carolina's decision will have essentially no bearing on the future of natural gas production. It is a valuable and relatively clean product that will be produced and sold in any event. The only question is whether North Carolina's government will allow its households, businesses, and prospective employees to benefit from that. Even if Cooper decides to come out against the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, however -- because he is persuaded on the merits or at least believes he can't side against the increasingly strident base of the left-shifted Democratic Party -- I still think clarity is better than caginess.

"You have enemies?" Victor Hugo once exclaimed. "Why, it is the story of every man who has done a great deed or created a new idea. It is the cloud which thunders around everything that shines." Governors ought to generate some rumbles every now and then. It's part of their job.

John Hood is chairman of the John Locke Foundation and appears on the talk show "NC SPIN." You can follow him @JohnHoodNC.

The Best Step on North Korea -- A Step Back

By D. G. Martin
January 2017 #2

If Charles Robert Jenkins were still around, we could ask him about how to best deal with North Korea. Jenkins, in case you don't remember, was the soldier from Rich Square, North Carolina, who spent 40 years in that country after deserting across the border while serving in the U.S. Army in South Korea.

Before he died last month, he told Los Angeles Times writer Jonathan Kaiman the lesson he learned from his time there. "I don't put nothing past North Korea. North Korea could do anything. North Korea don't care."

"Ain't nobody live good in North Korea. Nothing to eat. No running water. No electricity. In the wintertime you freeze -- in my bedroom, the walls were covered in ice."

That insight might help us understand better the nature of the country that is threatening a nuclear missile attack against major U.S. cities. But it does not lay out a strategy for dealing with the North Korean threat.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says the current administration recognizes the challenge. "When President Trump took office, he identified North Korea as the United States' greatest security threat. He abandoned the failed policy of strategic patience. In its place we carried out a policy of pressure through diplomatic and economic sanctions."

"A door to dialogue remains open, but we have made it clear that the regime must earn its way back to the negotiating table."

But the North Koreans have not jumped at the opportunity to talk to the U.S. Surprisingly, they are now talking to the South Koreans about the possibility of participating in the Winter Olympics, which South Korea is hosting next month.

Responding to these talks and the possibility of North Korean participation, Sen. Lindsey Graham says the U.S. should boycott the Olympics if North Korea participates. "Allowing Kim Jong Un's North Korea to participate in #WinterOlympics would give legitimacy to the most illegitimate regime on the planet."

Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un and our president trade angry threats like bullies in a school yard.

Contrary to Secretary Tillerson's assertion that North Korea is our "greatest security threat," the greatest threat to the U.S. may be the fixation of people like Tillerson, Graham, and Trump on Kim Jong Un.

Is there a better way for the U.S. to deal with North Korea's nuclear threat than President Trump's boastful threats to destroy North Korea militarily if the U.S. is provoked?

The extraordinary attention given to the North Korean threat is understandable, but it might be counterproductive. Our efforts, our threats, our daily absorption arguably could be doing more harm than good.

We may be paying too much attention to North Korea.

Maybe we should take a step back, get out of the direct confrontation mode and disclaim the primary responsibility for dealing with North Korea's nuclear fixation, and adopt these guidelines:

1. Cede leadership and responsibility for North Korea to those most at risk: China, South Korea, Japan and, perhaps Russia. Make it clear that we will be supportive of their efforts and will cooperate with the solutions they develop, but we will not dictate terms or take the lead in any negotiations.
2. Continue to work with other nations and the U.N. to enforce and expand the sanctions against North Korea, working as a partner and not insisting on directing the effort.
3. Continue and accelerate research and construction of expanded anti-missile capability, quietly and without unnecessary disclosure, working as rapidly as possible to check the North Korean missiles should they ever be launched.
4. Quietly develop, test and improve contingency plans for a strong response to any North Korea military action against South Korea.

As Charles Jenkins pointed out, there is no good way to deal with the North Koreans. But maybe a step-back from confrontation would be "less bad" than our current frantic and provocative approach.

D.G. Martin hosts "North Carolina Bookwatch," which airs Sundays at 11 a.m. and Thursdays at 5 p.m. on UNC-TV.

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